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WASHINGTON WINDOW: CURSING THE PUDDLE INSTEAD OF PLUGGING THE LEAK

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There is, and should be, a rule of journalism that says the mechanics of news reporting are not news. ''Nobody cares how hard it was to get the story,'' the old city editor told the young reporter. ''Just tell the news.''

This, with apologies, is an exception to the rule. It is about reporting news in Washington, and it may help you understand some of the stories you read or hear on radio and television.

Most news stories are not eyewitness accounts, but are based on what someone said -- a police dispatcher, a nuclear scientist or a president. The person who spoke to the reporter usually is identified by name and title.

But in some stories, especially from Washington, the information is attributed to ''an informed source'' or some other phrase to disguise who is speaking.

Reporters and editors do not like these stories, but sometimes it is impossible to get the news without agreeing to conceal the source. Most agree to do so only if the information is very important to the public and there is no way to get it on the record.

But this device can be abused, both by journalists and their sources. Reporters have fabricated information and attributed anonymous sources. And some news sources have used anonymity to spread lies or reveal secrets.

This last abuse is an issue in Washington. It has become the habit of many officials to insist that they not be identified when they talk about important matters of national policy.

An example was Henry Kissinger, who often would allow himself to be quoted only as ''a senior official'' when he talked to reporters. When Kissinger left, the ''senior official'' dodge was hungrily embraced by officials in the Democratic and Republican administrations that followed.

The most extreme example of the device is the ''leak,'' the disclosure of information, sometimes involving national security, that is supposed to be secret. Many leaks come from people angry about losing some bureaucratic battle to embarass their enemies. But they also come from high ranking officials or their aides who want to influence public opinion without taking responsibility for their statements.

When that happens, reporters can find themselves in a bind. They know they are being used, but they also believe the information is important to the public. If they use the information, they may be denounced in public by the same person who gave it to them in private.

One could say, with Willie Lohman, that kind of heat ''comes with the territory.''

But what does one say when one high-ranking official of the government proposes to prosecute news organizations that print or broadcast news that was given them on the sly by another high-ranking official of the same government? This is not a rhetorical question. It is a question that might be put to CIA Director William Casey, who has proposed prosecuting five newspapers that disclosed how the United States got evidence that Libya was involved in a terrorist bombing of a Berlin discotheque before the U.S. air strike against Libya.

It is a question that might lead Mr. Casey to the conclusion that when you have water in your basement, it's smarter to look for the leaky pipe than to curse the puddle.